

FINN'S BAYA (*PLOCEUS MEGARHYNCHUS* HUME)

BY

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I recently had the opportunity of examining a weaver bird sent to the Bombay Natural History Society by the Victoria Gardens, Bombay, where it had died in captivity in September 1949. Its provenance was unknown. The underparts of this specimen are yellow from chin to lower belly and it also has a yellowish wash on the head, thereby agreeing with the published description of Finn's Baya (*Ploceus megarhynchus*). It was sexed as a female on dissection.

An examination of the literature available indicates that much of the mystery and confusion that surrounds this species stems from the doubts cast upon O'Donel's records of *Ploceus megarhynchus* breeding in the Duars. In 1933, Whistler writing in 'The Vernay Scientific Survey of the Eastern Ghats' (*J.B.N.H.S.*, xxxvi, p. 882-883) observed that while Hume's type and co-type, 'two females or males in winter plumage', were large and could not be matched in a large series of *philippinus* and *burmanicus*, the series of skins from the Duars in the British Museum as well as 'others given or loaned to me by Mr. H. V. O'Donel and Mr. Inglis belong beyond dispute to *burmanicus*. The series of skins presented by O'Donel to the Bombay Natural History Society can no longer be traced.'

In 1935 Sálím Ali visited Kaladoongi ca. 500 ft. (the type locality) in search of this species, but failed to find it. He however re-scrutinised the literature and had a fresh search made in the Society's collections which now revealed four weaver birds collected by O'Donel in the Duars, one female in 1912 and three birds in 1925. These were sent to Whistler who identified them all as *burmanicus* including the 1912 female. Concerning the last mentioned specimen his report reads in part: 'the crown and nape and sides of the face are olive brown strongly washed with yellow and practically unstreaked, these parts contrasting with the rest of the upper plumage. The chin, throat, breast and flanks are largely canary yellow. In all other respects the bird agrees entirely with the rest of the series, and I have no doubt that it is the same form *burmanicus*. I have a female of *Ploceus p. philippinus* which has much yellow on it of a similar type and this evidently merely means that some particularly vigorous female assumes an incipient breeding plumage.'¹

On the identity of these specimens O'Donel's records of *P. megarhynchus* breeding in the Duars, quoted by Stuart Baker in the *Fauna and Nidification*, were dismissed by Whistler as incorrect.

A fresh examination of the Society's collection now reveals 2 more weavers collected by O'Donel in 1912 on the same date and in the same

¹ Attention might here be drawn to Finn's note in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 1899, p. 251 'There are in the Indian Museum several specimens of *P. atrigula* (= *p. burmanicus*) showing an admixture of yellow with the buff of the breast, some of them procured by myself in Calcutta alive and kept so for a time to see if they would develop more of the yellow colour which they did not.'

locality as the above ♀—(Nos. 3 and 5 on the accompanying list). Together, these specimens seem to form a series obtained from the same breeding colony. All the three birds were originally diagnosed as *passerinus* [= *burmanicus*] as shown on the labels in Kinnear's handwriting. The male, however, has later been corrected on the label to *megarhynchus* in Stuart Baker's handwriting and over his initials. There seems to me no doubt that this specimen, as well as the other two, are in fact not *burmanicus* but *megarhynchus* (or an undescribed species?).

O'Donel's claim that his Duars breeding colony belonged to *P. megarhynchus* is supported by his description of the nests. 'The colony' he says, 'was in a vast area of grass more or less intermixed with scrub, and the nests were larger than those of *manyar* and were loosely and carelessly put together with no lining, and attached to the stems of grasses, sometimes several. The colony consisted of at least 20 pairs but was loosely scattered'.

Incidentally it may be mentioned that the Bhutan Duars are only a few hundred feet above sea-level and there is so far no evidence of this species breeding at 3,000-4,000 ft. as suggested in the Fauna.

Another possible source of doubt and error concerning the species *megarhynchus* has also suggested itself:

At a meeting of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1899, Finn exhibited two living specimens of a weaver-purchased from a Mr. W. Rutledge (of Entally), and described them as a new species under the name *P. rutledgii*. They were described as similar to the male of *P. passerinus* in breeding plumage but easily distinguishable by their larger size and entirely yellow undersurface. Finn added: 'both have the same coloration and are of about the same size, but as one has a stouter head and is brighter than the other and constantly sings, it is possible they are male and female, and that the sexes will prove to be similar in the species.' At a later date when the birds went into winter plumage: 'both specimens similar, but one was slightly duller than the other and also slenderer in make', Finn decided that they were in reality Hume's *megarhynchus*, and his *rutledgii* therefore became a synonym. One or both these birds were presumably sent to London, because specimen No. 23704, now in the Indian Museum marked ♂ and in undress plumage, bears the legend on its label 'Exhibited in 1899, purchased from W. Rutledge whose supplier obtained it from Naini Tal area'. Another skin (presumably the second of Finn's original *rutledgii*) marked 'Indian Museum No. 24746. Zoological Society's Gardens London, recd. 18-6-1901 died 1-7-1904', is no longer available in the Indian Museum. The information concerning it is from Salim Ali who obtained it on loan from the Zoological Survey of India in 1935 and in addition to examining and measuring it, also made a colour sketch of the skin.

Now, Stuart Baker in Nidification states that the only eggs known are those laid by Jamrach's birds in captivity on September 19th, 1901, which would be well within the life span of the above two specimens. Piecing the data together, I am inclined to hazard a guess that Rutledge's (Finn's) birds reached the Zoological Society,

Date and Source	Origin	Sex	Bill from base of skull to tip	Wing	Tail	Tarsus	Remarks
1. Dec. 1866 A. O. Hume	Kaladoongi, below Naini Tal Type sp. in B.M.		21.5 mm.	77 mm.	56 mm.	...	Both in non-breeding plumage originally referred to as females, but this has been queried by Whistler.
2. Dec. 1866 A. O. Hume	Kaladoongi, below Naini Tal	?	22 mm.	80.5 mm.	59 mm.	...	
3. 25th May, 1912 H. V. O'Donel B.N.H.S. Collection.	Cotype in B.M. Bhutan Duars.	♂	23 mm.	83 mm.	59 mm.	25 mm.	Marked <i>megarhynchus</i> by E.C.S.B. This is the brightest yellow of all. The yellow cap does not extend to the nape. Underparts all yellow except vent. Rump brown; yellow margin to one feather on back. Yellow wash on forehead and distinct pale yellow on chin, throat and breast. Yellow wash on crown; less yellow on underparts than in 4; lower belly white.
4. 25th May, 1912 H. V. O'Donel B.N.H.S. Col.	Bhutan Duars	♀	20 mm.	74 mm.	55 mm.	23 mm.	
5. 25th May, 1912 H. V. O'Donel B.N.H.S. Col.	Bhutan Duars	♀	20 mm.	76 mm.	55 mm.	24 mm.	
Nos. 3, 4 and 5 are acknowledged in the <i>Journal</i> , xxi, p. 1360 as <i>P. passerinus</i>							
6. 12th Sept., 1949 Victoria Gardens, Bombay. Died in captivity	?	♀	20 mm.	73 mm.	52.5 mm.	23.5 mm.	Yellow wash on head; pale yellow from chin to lower belly; vent white.
7. 19th Aug., 1936 Dr. S. C. Law's Aviary, Calcutta. Died in captivity	?	♂	23 mm.	80 mm.	missing	24 mm.	Yellow cap as bright as in 3, and extending to nape; rump and all underparts including feathers on legs yellow.
8. 1st July, 1904 Indian Museum sp. No. 24746 marked Zoological Society's Gardens, London. Recd. 18-6-1901. Died: 1-7-1904.	?	♂ (?)	20.5 mm.	83.5 mm.	56 mm.	23 mm.	Upper tail coverts and all underparts yellow; upper plumage drab brown, probably one of two referred to by Finn and unless other specimens are discovered, *this or the next also responsible for egg laid on 19th Sept. 1901.

slight streaks on breast feathers. Dr. B. Biswas of the Zoological Survey of India advises: 'This was kept more or less exposed for a good many years and this may perhaps be the cause of the present condition of our only specimen.'

In underess plumage with traces of yellow on white chin and near eye. Head not concolorous with back, but browner. Yellow cap with undersurface yellow except vent and under-tail coverts which white. Trace of yellow on back and upper tail coverts.

2nd May, 1950	Dr. W. Koelz	...	Agia, near Goalpara, Assam.	♂	21 mm.	80 mm.	57 mm.	23 mm.
11. 3rd May, 1950	Dr. W. Koelz	...	Agia, near Goalpara, Assam.	♂	22 mm.	82 mm.	59 mm.	26 mm.
Nos. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10 and 11 are appreciably darker above than <i>passerinus</i> from Burma but can be matched with <i>philippinus</i> from India.								
(a)	Average measurements of all listed (11 specimens)			...	21.2 mm. (20-23 mm.)	78.7 mm. (73-83.5 mm.)	56.2 mm. (52.5-59 mm.)	23.5 mm. (20-25 mm.)
(b)	Average measurements of four males (Nos. 3, 7, 10 and 11)			...	23 mm.	81.5 mm.	59 mm.	24.5 mm.
(c)	Average measurements of three females (Nos. 4, 5 and 6)			...	20 mm.	74.3 mm. (73-76 mm.)	53.1 mm.	23.5 mm.
(d)	Average measurements of four others (Nos. 1, 2, 8 and 9)			...	21 mm. (20-22 mm.)	79.5 mm. (77-83.5 mm.)	56.25 mm. (51-59 mm.)	21.5 mm.
(e)	Measurements of <i>P. philippinus</i> in Fauna, Vol. III, p. 68			...	16-18 mm.	68-75 mm.	45-50 mm.	19-20 mm.
(f)	Measurements of <i>P. passerinus</i> in Fauna, Vol. III, p. 70			...	16-18 mm.	69-78 mm. (very few below 72 mm.)	46-50 mm.	about 20 mm.
(g)	Measurements of nine skins of <i>P. p. burmanicus</i> (= <i>passerinus</i>) from Bengal and Assam in B.N.H.S. Coll.			...	19.4 mm. (18-20 mm.)	74 mm. (70-76 mm.)	49.3 mm. (45-56 mm.)	20.4 mm. (19-22 mm.)
(h)	Six males from above			...	19.6 mm.	75.5 mm.	50.3 mm.	21 mm.
(i)	Three females from above			...	19 mm.	71.3 mm.	47.6 mm.	20 mm.

In (g) and (h) are included 2 specimens which deserve mention (1) A male collected by E. O. Shebbare at Goalpara, Assam on 5th March 1910 measures: Bill 19 mm., wing 76 mm.; tail 56 mm. and tarsus 22 mm. The measurements overlap with *megarhynchus* but the coloration is typical of *burmanicus*.

(2) A male obtained from Calcutta market by the Indian Museum has unequal bright rufous patches on each side of the breast and traces of the same colour on its upper-parts. This cannot be matched with anything in our collection. The measurements agree with *burmanicus*: Bill 20 mm.; wing 73 mm.; tail 49 mm.; tarsus 20 mm.

* Dr. B. Biswas has referred me to two notes in the *Ibis*, 1902, p. 169 and the *Bulletin of the British Ornithological Club* (1903), vol. 14, pp. 23-24 in which Mr. E. W. Harper records a male of the large Indian Weaver-bird obtained from the Calcutta Bird Market said to have been bought at Gorakhpur (300 miles south-east of Naini Tal). Mr. Harper adds that one of the specimens obtained by Finn 'is still living in the Parrot-house of the Zoological Gardens, Regent's Park. The Indian menagerie on view at Earl's Court Exhibition last year contained 9 or 10 of these birds.' It is interesting to note that so many were available at one time but there is no information as to how they were disposed of or if the skins are now available.

